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Consequences of conservatism: Black male undergraduates and the politics of historically Black colleges and universities

Shaun R. Harper

University of Pennsylvania, sharper1@upenn.edu

Marybeth Gasman

University of Pennsylvania, mgasman@gse.upenn.edu

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Consequences of conservatism: Black male undergraduates and the politics of historically Black colleges and universities

Abstract

Previous research has highlighted numerous ways in which historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) offer more supportive educational environments for Black students than do predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Notwithstanding the consistency of these findings, persistence and graduation rates remain low for undergraduates, especially men, at HBCUs. Furthermore, anecdotal reports and news stories have called attention to the conservative politics of many Black colleges. This study explores how Black male students characterize, respond to, and make sense of environmental politics at 12 HBCUs that participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study. In addition to 2-3 hour face-to-face individual interviews with 76 undergraduates, documents from 103 HBCUs were analyzed to gather additional insights into the political press of these institutions. Conservatism was evident in the areas of sexuality and sexual orientation, student self-presentation and expression, and the subordinate status of students beneath faculty and administrators.

Comments

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Consequences of Conservatism: Black Male Undergraduates and the Politics of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Shaun R. Harper
Marybeth Gasman

University of Pennsylvania
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Previous research has highlighted numerous ways in which historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) offer more supportive educational environments for Black students than do predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Notwithstanding the consistency of these findings, persistence and graduation rates remain low for undergraduates, especially men, at HBCUs. Furthermore, anecdotal reports and news stories have called attention to the conservative politics of many Black colleges. This study explores how Black male students characterize, respond to, and make sense of environmental politics at 12 HBCUs that participated in the National Black Male College Achievement Study. In addition to 2-3 hour face-to-face individual interviews with 76 undergraduates, documents from 103 HBCUs were analyzed to gather additional insights into the political press of these institutions. Conservatism was evident in the areas of sexuality and sexual orientation, student self-presentation and expression, and the subordinate status of students beneath faculty and administrators.

Each participant signed a consent form that granted us permission to use his actual name and the name of his institution, instead of pseudonyms.

Over the past decade, much attention has been placed on marginal college matriculation trends, problematic engagement and achievement patterns, and high attrition rates among Black male undergraduates (Byrne, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2006a, 2008). While most conversations regarding these issues are typically based on anecdotal reports from individual campuses, a few empirical studies have illuminated the extent to which enrollments and achievement are problematic for this population. For example, Harper (2006a) found that 67.6% of Black men who start college do not graduate within six years, which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups. Although Black male achievement challenges persist across institution type, researchers have focused almost exclusively on understanding complexities within the context of predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) asserted that gender gaps at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have been narrowly considered in recent years, as most scholars have devoted their efforts to comparing Black students at these institutions to their same-race peers at PWIs. Similarly, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) noted, "With so much national attention being placed on issues facing African American students at PWIs, particularly with regard to affirmative action, the quality of life at HBCUs for these students (especially African American men) has gone virtually unnoticed" (p. 190). Thus, the aim of their research was to capture Black male students' insights into behavioral and attitudinal norms that yielded undesired outcomes on HBCU campuses. Kimbrough and Harper's study revealed troubling sociocultural norms within Black male peer groups on HBCU campuses, but left much to be understood about the environmental ethos and political dynamics that complicated Black male student success.

In 2005, 19% of Black male students at HBCUs reported persistence to degree, compared to 25% at PWIs. This lack of understanding of environmental politics from HBCUs. Six-year graduation rates of Black male students at HBCUs are typically exacer-

Recent media reports have challenged the status quo. Guess, 2007; Lee, 2007, rather than pushing for change, reportedly restrict funding among those who are Black remains understudied. Black male students

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous HBCU/PWIs environments that Black students (Allen, 1999) has been shown to be engaged at higher levels (Berger & Milem, 2000; Watson & Kuh, 1999) academically, despite disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions (Cokley, 1999; DeSantis & Gasman, 2008). Lasting of science, medicine, Tudico, 2007; Williams, maintaining HBCUs and politically charged

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have played a dual role in racial protest and change in communities in which

Throughout the history and practices they follow (Anderson (1988), Lauderback, controversies that took place at Hampton Institute. The stronghold on the campus strict codes of conduct for entertainment for local Rights Movement re presidents expelling the struggle (Gasman, 2007)

In 2005, 19% of the bachelor's degrees earned by Black men were conferred at HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 2007); however, little is known about what occurred throughout their persistence to degree completion on those campuses. Perhaps more troubling is the insufficient understanding of environmental factors that compel so many Black males to withdraw prematurely from HBCUs. Six-year graduation rates were factored into the 2007 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of Black colleges. Only nine of the 81 institutions listed (11.1%) graduated more than half of their students within six years. Kimbrough and Harper (2006) found that low attrition rates are typically exacerbated between the sexes at HBCUs, with Black women sometimes graduating at rates two to three times higher than their same-race male counterparts.

Recent media reports have portrayed HBCUs as highly conservative in nature, avoiding any challenge to the status quo, suppressing student expression, speech, and life choices (Gaona, 2003; Guess, 2007; Lee, 2006; McGaughey, 2006; Meeks, 2003; Robinson & King, 2005). Accordingly, rather than pushing students to question authoritarian policies and practices, some Black colleges reportedly restrict freedom and input. The ways in which students experience this, particularly among those who are most vulnerable to discontinuing matriculation prior to degree attainment, remains understudied, hence the purpose of this article. Specifically, the authors examine how Black male students characterize, respond to, and make sense of political climates at HBCUs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous HBCU/PWI comparative studies show that Black colleges foster nurturing, familial environments that include faculty and staff who are significantly more supportive of Black students (Allen, 1992; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Davis, 1999; Fleming, 1984). It has been shown empirically that Black undergraduates at these institutions are more satisfied, engaged at higher levels, and have stronger self-concepts than their same-race peers elsewhere (Berger & Milem, 2000; Flowers, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Watson & Kuh, 1996). Moreover, researchers have found that some HBCU students perform well academically, despite being insufficiently prepared in K-12 schools and coming from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Allen, 1992; Cheatham, Slaney, & Coleman, 1990; Cokley, 1999; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Kim, 2002; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Lastly, HBCUs prepare many of the nation's Black leaders, especially in the areas of science, medicine, mathematics, and engineering (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, & Tudico, 2007; Willie & Edmonds, 1978). Although these studies strengthen the rationale for maintaining HBCUs, most higher education researchers have shied away from more controversial and politically charged topics concerning these institutions.

According to Thompson (1973) HBCUs

have played a dual role: on the one hand, they have endeavored to prepare Black leadership to serve as a catalyst of racial protest and change. But on the other, they have worked out patterns of accommodation within the segregated communities in which they are located. (p. 15)

Throughout the history of Black colleges, students have rebelled against institutional policies and practices they found too restrictive and aligned with the status quo. Some historians, including Anderson (1988), Lamon, (1974), and Wolters (1975) have explored revolts and student speech controversies that took place on several campuses during the 1920s, including Fisk University and Hampton Institute. In both cases, students were angered by a mostly White administrative stronghold on the campus newspaper, policies prohibiting student dancing, the enforcement of strict codes of conduct with regard to sexuality, and the institutions' support of student Jim Crow entertainment for local Whites. In the 1950s and 1960s, HBCU students participating in the Civil Rights Movement received mixed support from administrators on their campuses, with some presidents expelling or turning over to authorities those who had participated in the Black freedom struggle (Gasman, 2007; Williamson, 2004).

Political issues at HBCUs continue to the present day. For example, the Thurgood Marshall College Fund released a report in 2006 on gender at public Black colleges in which student survey respondents reported witnessing faculty members treating students differently due to their actual or perceived sexual orientations, specifically discriminating against gay male students. Most survey respondents attributed these actions to their professors' religious beliefs. Gasman and Drezner (2006) also observed that conservative religious convictions sustain homophobia within the Black college context. They noted that although the number of gay and lesbian student organizations on HBCU campuses has grown, leaders of these groups have encountered adverse reactions that included death threats in some cases.

Additionally, some news reporters have explored limits on free speech and self-expression at HBCUs. In their article, "Corporate Plantation: Political Repression and the Hampton Model," Robinson and King (2005) critiqued Hampton University president William Harvey's conservative views on dress codes, free speech, and acceptable conduct. Also, a 2007 news story called attention to the enforcement of a dress code at Paul Quinn College, an HBCU in Texas (Guess, 2007). Specifically, Michael J. Sorrell, the College's president, developed a policy requiring students to dress in business casual clothing between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Those who dressed in loungewear, casual outfits, or athletic attire were not permitted to attend classes or eat in the dining hall on campus, Guess reported. The story went on to describe how first offenders were sentenced community service, and those who violated the policy a second time were required to jog with President Sorrell on Saturday mornings. The president was quoted in the story saying the policy was good because violators did not enjoy getting out of bed early on Saturday mornings, plus it afforded him opportunities for engagement with students. For those who could not afford business casual clothes, gently used items were donated for them to wear.

With the exception of news articles of this nature and other anecdotal reports, HBCU students are rarely asked about political complexities and restraints when researchers pursue insights into their educational experiences. Therefore, a dual-pronged framework for analytical sense-making was constructed as we endeavored to explore empirically the environmental politics and organizational norms Black male undergraduates encounter on these campuses.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two related theoretical concepts from the college environments, campus ecology, and organizational change literature: (a) organizational formalization, and (b) environmental press. Formalization focuses on the importance of rules in organizations—the number of regulations, the degrees to which they are enforced, and the ways in which they are communicated in writing and through nonverbal cues to students and others on campus (Hage & Aiken, 1967; Strange & Banning, 2001). Hage and Aiken delineated two aspects of formalization: (a) *codification*, which refers to the extent to which roles are clearly specified in organizations, and (b) *rule observation*, meaning the degree to which organization members conform to prescribed regulations and standards. Degrees of formalization are also reinforced through shared understandings of the attitudinal, behavioral, and political parameters that are permissible and non-negotiable on a campus. According to Strange (2003), "high degrees of formalization are associated generally with organizational rigidity and resistance to change" (p. 304).

Environmental press refers to the norms of a campus environment that can be described as unique to the institution by students, faculty, and staff, as well as visitors (Pace & Stern, 1958; Stern, 1970; Strange, 2003). Presses are characteristic of what is generally acceptable and unacceptable within the campus environment (Pace, 1969 as cited in Strange & Banning, 2001). As such, they shape the behaviors students display and the degrees to which they buy into perceived political consensus on a campus. Baird (1988) noted, "Presses are of two types, first as they exist in reality or an objective inquiry discloses them to be (alpha press), and second as they are perceived or interpreted by the individual (beta press)" (p. 3).

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Strange and Banning (2001) explained that certain environmental presses can inhibit student growth, particularly when there is significant distance between what the student needs or desires and the prevailing press of the campus. The greater the distance and feeling of incongruence, the more likely the student is to leave the institution without earning her or his degree (Bean, 2005). Presses are also helpful for characterizing behavioral and sociopolitical commonalities within a particular institution type (e.g., liberal arts colleges, religiously-affiliated institutions, or HBCUs). As such, presses are related to Kuh and Hall's (1993) characterization of "cultural perspectives," since they

determine what is 'acceptable behavior' for students, faculty, staff, and others in various institutional settings. They are relatively easy to determine, and members of various groups who adhere to perspectives are usually aware of them. (p. 6)

The aforementioned theories, when juxtaposed with anecdotal and media reports of HBCUs and the dearth of empirical studies regarding Black male student experiences with the political ethos of these campuses, led to the exploration of the following research questions:

- How do Black male undergraduates characterize the politics of HBCUs;
- How do they experience the political presses of these institutions;
- What are these students' affective dispositions toward the political ethos of HBCU campus environments; and
- What do they perceive to be the ramifications of resisting institutional norms and cultural regulations?

METHODS

Data Sources and Procedures

This article is based primarily on findings from the National Black Male College Achievement Study (hereafter called the National Study), the largest-ever empirical research study of Black male undergraduates. Data were collected from 219 students at 42 colleges and universities in 20 different states. Six institution types were represented in the study: private liberal arts colleges, public research universities, highly selective private research universities, comprehensive state universities, public HBCUs, and private HBCUs. Administrators such as presidents, provosts, and deans of students nominated and senior student leaders (e.g., student government association presidents) helped identify Black male undergraduates who had earned cumulative GPAs above 3.0; established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations; developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom; participated in enriching educational experiences (e.g., study abroad programs, internships, service learning, and summer research programs); and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their college achievements.

These criteria were used because decades of empirical research on undergraduate students clearly indicated that those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities on college and university campuses are more satisfied with their experiences, have a higher likelihood of navigating institutional obstacles with success, and come to enjoy a more robust set of educational outcomes than do their peers who approach the college experience more passively (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Specifically regarding Black male collegians, Harper (2006b) asserts:

[Engagement] indisputably makes the difference in African American men's short-term gains and long-term outcomes. It is clear that African American males who are actively involved in campus activities and hold leadership positions in student organizations have better experiences and gain more from college than their uninvolved same-race male peers. (p. 90)

If these claims are true, then it is conceivable that much can be learned from actively engaged student leaders about the ways in which they experienced and ultimately navigated the politics of the Black colleges they attended.

Each student participated in a 2 to 3 hour semi-structured individual interview on his campus and follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone. The lead researcher visited all 42 campuses to conduct face-to-face interviews with each participant. A semi-structured interview technique was used, which simultaneously permitted data collection and authentic participant reflection (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Although standard questions and protocol were used in the interviews, discussions often became conversational, thereby allowing the participants to reflect on the experiences they deemed most significant. Six public HBCUs (Albany State University, Cheyney University, Florida A&M University, Norfolk State University, North Carolina Central University, and Tennessee State University) and six private Black colleges (Clark Atlanta University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Howard University, Morehouse College, and Tuskegee University) were among the participating institutions. Only data from the 12 HBCUs were analyzed for the purposes of this article.

In addition to interview data from the National Study, we analyzed institutional documents (namely Web sites and student handbooks) from 103 HBCUs to better understand how rules and norms are articulated to current and prospective students. Extra effort was devoted to analyzing documents from the 12 participating institutions in this study.

Participants

The National Study included 76 participants from the 12 HBCU campuses. This sub-sample included 6 sophomores, 25 juniors, and 45 seniors, representing a wide range of academic majors. Two participants had fathered children while in college, and one had done so prior to enrolling. Their self-reported socioeconomic origins were as follows: Low Income (11.8%), Working Class (46.1%), Middle Class (40.8%), and Affluent/Wealthy (1.3%). No participant disclosed his sexual orientation—gay, bisexual, questioning, heterosexual, or otherwise. On nine of the 12 campuses, Black men were presidents of the Student Government Association (SGA), which is often deemed the most coveted and influential student leadership role at an HBCU (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006); all nine SGA presidents participated in this study. Prior to starting the interviews, each participant completed a profile form that included a 10-point political orientation scale—a continuum from “more liberal” (1) to “more conservative” (10). HBCU participants were only slightly more conservative than were the overall sample; differences were trivial. Specifically, the mean for the 219 students across all six institution types was 4.10 ($SD = 1.64$), compared to 4.71 ($SD = 1.44$) for the HBCU participants upon whom this article is based. Each participant signed a consent form that granted us permission to use his actual name and the name of his institution, instead of pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Several techniques prescribed by Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze the data collected from interviews with the 76 men in the sub-sample. We first bracketed our thoughts and assumptions as we read each line of the participants’ transcripts. The margins of the transcripts were marked with reflective comments regarding presumptions and initial reactions. After bracketing, the transcripts were sorted and key phases were linearly arranged under tentative headings in the NVivo® qualitative data analysis software program (QSR International, 2008). This process resulted in the identification of invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994), which were sub-themes that consistently emerged across participant interviews. The invariant constituents were helpful for understanding the participants’ shared perspectives on the politics of their campuses, and were later clustered into three themes, which are presented below. As an additional step, Harper’s (2007) trajectory analysis method was used to understand what each participant experienced along his navigational journey through college, and how he experienced his respective HBCU campus. Relevant stories from the 76 participants’ trajectory summaries were used to corroborate the three

themes. Lastly, texts we collected from the

Role of the Researcher

The process for conducting data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999) assumes that the researcher’s background, assumptions, and experiences shape what they see and hear during analyses (Harper, 2007).

The myth that research is a neutral point in time, all research is

To this end, we attempt to understand personal connections

We both maintained our roles as champions for their education at Albany State University. One sibling who was pursuing his education during the time at various Black colleges and universities (Baez, & Turner, 2000) United Negro College Fund and the National Association for HBCU Administration on Historically Black Colleges and Universities consultations on HBCU issues; secured grants at a university where both chapters applauding the achievements of Black students.

Our ethic of care engendered tremendous trust. We endeavored to authenticate our interviews. But on the other hand, we would be misused again. We have ill-intentions. We hope that insights into our lives will be used to improve our lives.

Regarding the process of an examination of our attrition case. Despite the fact that we had an enduring appointment with a roommate, a Black man from Albany, Georgia. At the time, he was removing his hat (a place). Admittedly, the student was in the student union, at the time that the Dean expressed his interest because of its ungentlemanly behavior. The Dean kept the Greyhound bus back

themes. Lastly, textural analyses were employed to identify illustrative examples in the documents we collected from the 103 HBCUs that related directly to findings from the participant interviews.

Role of the Researchers and Trustworthiness

The process for conducting qualitative inquiry relies on the researcher as the instrument for data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, it is essential for researchers to identify the backgrounds, assumptions, and biases they bring to the research study and recognize how these shape what they see, the decisions they make, and the value they place on findings that emerge during analyses (Harper & Kuh, 2007). Janesick (2000) argued,

The myth that research [quantitative or qualitative] is objective in some way can no longer be taken seriously. At this point in time, all researchers should be free to challenge prevailing myths, such as the myth of objectivity. (p. 385)

To this end, we attempt to make clear the ways in which our professional backgrounds and personal connections to Black colleges affected the treatment of the data.

We both maintain meaningful and long-standing relationships with HBCUs, and are serious champions for their continued existence. One is a proud graduate and actively engaged alumnus of Albany State University (one of the 12 institutions at which data were collected), and has a sibling who was pursuing a bachelor's degree at Morehouse College (another school in the study) during the time at which this article was written. The other has published four books related to Black colleges and their leaders (Gasman, 2007; Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008; Gilpin & Gasman, 2003). Between us, we have contributed annually to the United Negro College Fund; served in various capacities with the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals (a professional organization for HBCU administrators); chaired the American Association of University Professors Committee on Historically Black Institutions; provided complimentary keynote addresses and free consultations on HBCU campuses; offered public praise in defense of Black colleges in media interviews; secured grants to actively recruit HBCU students for graduate study at the Ivy League university where both are faculty members; and published numerous journal articles and book chapters applauding these institutions for the profoundly important role they play in the education of Black students.

Our ethic of care and supportive dispositions toward the advancement of Black colleges engendered tremendous discomfort as we attempted to make sense of the data. On the one hand, we endeavored to authentically and honestly report the perspectives participants shared during the interviews. But on the other hand, we worried that reporting data regarding the politics of HBCUs would be misused against the institutions and their leaders by news reporters and those who may have ill-intentions. This article is not meant at all to be an indictment of Black colleges, but we do hope that insights into some of the less politically-favorable aspects of the institutional cultures will be used to improve environments for the retention of Black males.

Regarding the political environment/retention nexus, during the analysis phase of this study an examination of our own biases and past experiences led to the recollection of one unfortunate attrition case. Despite his overwhelmingly positive experiences as an undergraduate student leader and an enduring appreciation for his alma mater, the lead author thought of his first college roommate, a Black male who drove 18 hours with his parents from Waterbury, Connecticut to Albany, Georgia. At freshmen orientation, the Dean of Students demanded that the young man remove his hat (a plain baseball cap that did not convey anything offensive) inside the building. Admittedly, the student found this annoying, but complied. A week later, he encountered the Dean in the student union, where he once again was chastised for wearing the cap indoors. It was at this time that the Dean explained the campus had a policy against wearing hats inside of buildings because of its ungentlemanly nature. The student verbally expressed displeasure, but was told by the Dean to keep the cap off indoors or leave the institution—two days later, he was on a Greyhound bus back to Connecticut and never returned to Albany State. He explained to his

roommate that he did not travel so far away from his parents only to be treated like a child. Plus, he simply disagreed with the strict "no hats" policy and failed to see its educational relevance.

Although this situation occurred 15 years prior to the authorship of this article, it inevitably influenced the lead author's sense-making of what the 76 participants reported about political climates and rule enforcement at the 12 HBCUs in the National Study. To the greatest possible extent, these assumptions and biases were discussed among the authors and superseded by a rigorous analytical approach that would yield useful and instructive data that might compel institutional leaders to rethink policies and practices that compel some Black men to drop out. Three additional efforts were undertaken to ensure data quality and trustworthiness—characterized by Lincoln and Guba (1986) as credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

An eight-member debriefing team was recruited to provide feedback on the article; to engage the authors in critical questioning regarding data interpretation and reporting; and to ensure the goal of providing instructive insights that would enable HBCU faculty and administrators to better understand how Black males perceive and experience the political ethos remained the focus of our article. This debriefing team included a president, vice president for student affairs, assistant vice president for academic affairs, and a Black male faculty member from four different HBCUs. Additional debriefers were two researchers from PWIs who study lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students at Black colleges and campus climates for diversity, as well as two Black men who graduated from HBCUs (one public and one private) within the past six years. Additionally, the article was sent to an Informant Team comprised of one participant from each of the 12 HBCUs in the study for comment; this was a method of conducting member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Feedback from the 20 debriefers and student informants was used to strengthen our analyses, data presentation, and implications.

Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure trustworthiness, some methodological and analytical shortcomings are apparent. First, their positions as student leaders on the 12 campuses may have afforded the 76 participants a different level of exposure to institutional politics. It is conceivable (although unconfirmed) that their perceptions of the political press were heightened and more pronounced than their uninvolved peers who did not hold leadership positions. Likewise, because this was a study of male students' perceptions and experiences, we are unable to provide insights into the gendered political realities of Black women at HBCUs. Furthermore, data were only collected from persisting Black males, not those who had withdrawn prior to the completion of their bachelor's degrees. Ways in which politics influenced retention decisions among the latter group therefore remain unknown. Finally, interviews were only conducted at six public and six private HBCUs. Although documents were collected from all 103 Black colleges, we caution readers against homogenizing these institutions and assuming the political norms reported by the 76 participants from the 12 institutions in this study are universally true across the remaining 91 institutions where interviews were not conducted.

FINDINGS

The participants described what can be easily characterized as political conservatism. These politics were so embedded in the structure of the institutions that many students expressed fear or unwillingness to challenge them. They had become norms that governed student behaviors. The participants elaborated on three areas in which the conservative political press of the institution was most powerful: (a) sexuality and sexual orientation, (b) self-presentation and expression, and (c) positional subordination. Evidence of these findings from interviews was also corroborated with text in many of the institutional documents analyzed.

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Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

Many HBCUs have strict rules concerning sex. An illustrative example of the enforcement of such policies is Rashim's experience as vice president of the SGA on his campus. During his junior year, it was rumored (but not officially confirmed) that he had fathered a child.

My advisor called me in her office and asked me, 'Rashim do you have a kid?' I was like, 'why, what does that have to do with my ability to perform my duties?' And then I just said, 'no comment.' Basically, I told her 'it is none of your business.'

Rashim felt insulted because his leadership abilities and private life had suddenly become intertwined in a way he viewed as unfair and irrelevant. Specifically, the SGA advisor, the dean of students, and the University president asked Rashim to resign. He challenged the administration to justify their request:

So the Dean calls me in the office and he is like, 'you can't have a kid and be in the SGA,' and I was like, 'says who, says where, can you show me that in writing?' I had already done my research and looked for any documentation that said I couldn't be an SGA official and have a kid, but it was not there. So basically they were telling me that I had to resign. I was like, 'no I am not.'

Ultimately, he ended up hiring an attorney because administrators continued to demand his resignation. After the lawyers became involved, Rashim was allowed to remain in his position, but lost the SGA presidential election the following year, despite his popularity and copious praise from peers regarding his excellent leadership as vice president.

Written policies toward sexual behaviors on one HBCU campus are noted: "Sexual misconduct is defined as including, but not limited to sexual intercourse, adultery, rape, sodomy and homosexual acts." In effect, consensual sex between adults is equated with rape in this particular institution's student handbook. Homosexuality was cited as sexual misconduct in several of the other documents reviewed. Perhaps this might explain, at least in part, why none of the HBCU participants in this study openly identified as gay or bisexual. The participants spoke at length about institutional resistance (mostly from faculty and administrators) to same-sex relationships. James, a student at Florida A&M University, attributed this resistance to the ways in which LGBT persons are treated in the larger Black community:

This campus is like the rest of Black society. Black society is not accepting of gay culture. And so, they are definitely on the outskirts of this campus. They're not included.

Others described how LGBT students had been rendered invisible on campus. There was recognition of the presence of gay Black males on campus—"you see them switch'n cross campus in high heels, carrying purses," one participant noted. However, these students were usually not part of Black male peer groups that were predominantly (or perceivably) heterosexual. Instead, they tended to cluster with other gay male students, the participants reported. This was especially true at Morehouse College, the only single-sex HBCU in the study. All the participants acknowledged there was a significant number of gay men on campus, but indicated that dialogue and meaningful interactions between these students and heterosexuals were routinely avoided. Ross, a senior, characterized Morehouse as a "very heterosexual place," and he observed that gay male students were not befriended by many heterosexual males on campus. Another Morehouse participant, Sean, posed a series of questions related to the institution's handling of heterosexism and homophobia:

Seeing how this is an all-male school, seeing how we're in the middle of Atlanta, and that Blacks are notoriously homophobic, how are we going to manage it? Are we just going to sweep it under the carpet? That's what's usually done.

On the HBCU campuses represented in this study, participants reported that structured conversations regarding LGBT issues had not been facilitated by administrators or faculty, since gossip among students was the norm. During the interviews some participants were asked to predict the response on campus if they were to suddenly announce they were gay or bisexual.

Are you joking? People wouldn't stop talking about it until I graduated. Coming out as a homosexual would undo everything I have accomplished as a leader on this campus.

Nonstop gossip by everyone (including faculty) was the most frequently offered prediction. Those who were major campus leaders (especially SGA presidents) overwhelmingly agreed they would likely be asked to resign their positions, or minimally they would lose administrative support. "It would be on the front page of *The Hilltop* [the campus newspaper]," one Howard University student believed.

Efforts to create student organizations for LGBT students were reportedly met with extreme opposition from administrators on eight of the 12 campuses, according to many of the participants. "We just got an organization for them on this campus, which wasn't easy," a North Carolina Central Student mentioned. Three Howard students felt the LGBT group existed, but was ignored by the University. Antonio, a student at Albany State, thought

being a Black gay male is not accepted on this campus, but that's something that we really need to work on because a lot of students don't understand, just because they have not been exposed.

Reportedly, the institutions also endeavored to restrict the possibility of sex among heterosexual students through the continuation of single-sex residence halls with no visitation privileges. "Unlike at White colleges, we do not have visitation rights here where men and women can visit each other's dorm rooms," a Cheyney University student noted. Specifically, at 10 campuses, men were not allowed to go beyond the lobby of residence halls occupied by women. When asked to explain the possible merits of the policy, one participant suspected:

The administration is scared that students are going to have sex if they are in each other's rooms. The reality is that we are adults and we are going to find ways to have sex if we want to. Boys sneak into girls' dorms all the time. It is an unnecessary rule because sex isn't the only reason why boys and girls would visit each other's rooms.

Most of the SGA presidents discussed how this had long been a major concern of students (women and men alike), but campus administrators were unwilling to reconsider any alternatives to the policy, including the possibility of a limited window of visitation hours (instead of 24-hour visiting privileges offered at many PWIs).

Self-Presentation and Expression

Similar to the Paul Quinn College account cited earlier in this article, our analyses revealed that many private and some public HBCUs continue to impose strict dress codes on students. These codes place limits on head wear and specify appropriate dress for various campus events. Participants told of faculty members ejecting male students from classes if they showed up wearing hats or baggy jeans, and administrators telling women when they were inappropriately dressed. "I remember our professor made my friend leave class because he was wearing a 'wife beater' [a tank-top undershirt]," a Norfolk State University student recalled. Virginia Union University actually includes language in its handbook prohibiting "wife beater" undershirts in public places on campus. On the Hampton University Web site, the dress code description is augmented with a historic photograph of Black women wearing formal dresses from the early-1900s, offering an example for contemporary students of the appropriate conservative dress code. Another institution justifies its dress code policy in this way:

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The dress code is based on the theory that learning to use socially acceptable manners and selecting attire appropriate to specific occasions and activities are critical factors in the total educational process.

In its student handbook, one HBCU urged students to "Dress for Success," noting that "lewd and/or indecent attire is unbecoming of university students."

Perhaps Oakwood University, a private institution affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, has the strictest language in its dress code, noting "Fashion is a mistress that rules with an iron hand" and "The love of display . . . kills the aspiration for a nobler life." Oakwood further articulates in its handbook, "the principles of modesty, chastity, simplicity, propriety, good taste, neatness, comeliness, and consistent witness are core values that relate to Christian dress." The institution also makes clear what should not be worn, including,

shorts, skorts/skirts, spaghetti straps, low cut (front or back) or strapless attire, bare midriff blouses/shirts, sheer or any tight clothing worn in a way that exposes undergarments or intimate body parts (back, chest, thighs, abdomen, etc.).

Edward Waters College indicates "there is a distinct relationship between students' attire and their classroom behavior, attitudes, and achievements." They enforce a dress code that "promotes the important business of learning and prevents distractions." According to the Claflin University student handbook, "durags," [hairdo scarves or skullcaps] "are not to be worn on the campus at anytime."

By and large, these dress restrictions were the norm across HBCUs, reflective of an almost Victorian discourse on dress and behavior at these institutions. In fact, in many of the handbooks we reviewed students are given exact directions regarding what to wear to specific places on campus as well as at specific events. The students expressed frustration with the rigidity of these rules, some believing the institutions' conceptualizations of inappropriate appearance were consistent with White stereotypes of Black men. One participant mentioned that several administrators insisted he cut his dreadlocks prior to campaigning in a campus election. "I would've expected that from a White person, but not from Black people at a Black college. I assumed they'd have greater cultural appreciation for my hair."

Positional Subordination

A lot of times I feel like the faculty and the staff and the administration are the adults, and the students are the children. The safest thing to do is not confront them on much of anything and stay in a child's place. If you don't, there will be consequences.

The final theme pertains to the suppression of dissenting views, especially in the classroom, and reports of HBCU students being positioned below administrators and faculty. Several participants admitted to having political perspectives that differed from those of their professors, but felt uncomfortable expressing such views for fear of ramifications. "Faculty members at Tennessee State do not allow us to tell them they are wrong. You couldn't pay me to try, even when I know they're wrong," one student commented. Publicly disagreeing with faculty and critiquing seemingly useless or politically narrow-minded readings was almost always unwelcome, several participants noted. Consequently, David shared:

I come home frustrated because I was in class all day listening to nonsense that we were talking about, wishing we could have gone deeper. When I have volunteered a different opinion, professors looked at me like I was insane.

David also feared the sharing of counter-perspectives in the classroom would have a negative impact on his grades.

Although participants offered several examples from classrooms, many Black men in this study also talked about the political risks associated with public disagreements with administrators and student organization advisors. Jonathan expressed frustration with the administrative control of a student leadership program:

We're kind of battling right now because the administration is trying to take more control of the program and change a lot of things. To my knowledge it's been more so of a student-run program, but they're trying to say that it's not, so we're battling back and forth.

Jonathan went on to describe how frustrated he and other student leaders felt about their loss of ownership in the program. Along the same lines, a student government president elsewhere shared the following story:

We are constantly at odds with our advisor. She might as well be the SGA President. I mean it is so hard to get her to understand that this is our organization. But then I have to be careful because she controls our budget, which is a problem. If she gets p***ed off with us and feels like we are taking away her power, she will keep our money—she has done this before. The best way to stay in good standing with her is to understand your position on this campus. She really is in charge of the SGA, not those of us the students elected.

Other participants described similar levels of contention regarding ownership of student organizations and the insertion of student voice into programmatic governance. Confirmation of this governance tension can be found in the HBCU student handbooks and on their Web sites. For example, on several campuses student organizations are not allowed to gather without permission and the presence of an advisor. "We have to be chaperoned to have a club meeting, which means we have very little power on this campus," one participant noted. Similarly, Stephen, president of the student body at Hampton, said "People really think I'm powerful. I'm not. The power still remains in the administrators' hands."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The 76 participants in this study offered insights into the political ethos of HBCUs that had been overlooked in recent research on the experiences of Black male undergraduates. As Strange and Banning (2001) suggested, environmental presses convey what is permissible and unacceptable on college campuses. From the interviews and documents we analyzed, it seems reasonable to conclude that wearing one's hair and dressing in certain ways, offering divergent opinions in classrooms, and challenging campus administrators are generally not allowed at many Black colleges. Likewise, engagement in any sort of sexual activity and being an openly gay student are usually in compliance with institutional norms and written regulations.

Hage and Aiken's (1967) two dimensions of organizational formalization (codification and rule observation) are useful in clarifying findings from the present study. The participants' accounts regarding the privileged positions of faculty members as unchallengeable in the classroom conveyed perceptions of subordination. That is, students' voices and perspectives were perceivably inferior to those of professors and administrators. As some reported, this was even true in clubs and organizations that were supposed to be governed by students. Moreover, the volume of regulations and specificity with which HBCU guidebooks are written, demonstrate an expectation for rule observation concerning dress, speech, sex, and student decision-making matters.

While some other institutions across the nation have created welcoming spaces for LGBT students, albeit to varying degrees and with arguable success, the HBCUs we examined had not endeavored to create inclusive environments for students who were not heterosexual. Only two campuses had university-sanctioned LGBT student organizations, and none had resource centers for these students. Even the men's college, where some participants estimated one-third to one-half of the students were gay, was reportedly slow in relaxing its resistance. Because the campus environments had been constructed to disregard the presence of LGBT students, their heterosexual peers behaved accordingly. Meaning, they too rendered their openly gay and bisexual male peers invisible, and segregation by sexual orientation was purportedly common.

Harper and Nichols (2008) found the within-group diversity that existed among Black male undergraduates in their study was harmful to the communalism and peer support needed to retain

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CONCLUSION

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these students. Although none of it was derived from students at HBCUs, there is a significant body of literature to confirm the educational benefits of meaningful student engagement with peers who are different—otherwise known as *interactional diversity* (antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny, Levin, & Milem, 2004; Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Cole, 2007; Engberg, 2004; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2007). Given the well-documented gains and outcomes associated with interactional diversity, Harper and antonio (2007) argued that educators must be deliberate in creating structured environments that enable diverse groups of students to learn from each others' differences. Such learning is necessary for participation in a diverse democracy and effectiveness in future settings (i.e., the workplace), they maintained. On HBCU campuses, this could occur through treating differently the presence of LGBT students.

Instead of pretending that LGBT students are not there (as most study participants described as commonplace), educators and administrators at Black colleges should intentionally structure conversations and experiences that allow heterosexual and LGBT students to learn from their differences, challenge stereotypes and misunderstandings, and develop a mutually respectful social code of conduct that extends beyond avoidance and segregated sexual grouping. Doing so would prepare these students for contexts beyond the campus in which LGBT and heterosexual persons must live and work.

According to Kuh and colleagues (2005), active student engagement in college classrooms, including asking questions and contributing to class discussions, has been proven educationally beneficial and value-added. However, the Black men we interviewed described such engagement as only permissible under one condition: the questions posed and points being discussed did not clash with the professors' perspectives. The pedagogical practices described by many participants are in conflict with the current student engagement research. Findings in this area are both complex and somewhat contradictory. The published research almost unanimously notes that HBCU faculty and staff are more supportive of Black students than are their counterparts at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Davis, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Watson & Kuh, 1996), while participants in the present study portrayed this support as conditional. It appears that in a comparative sense, professors and administrators at Black colleges do foster more supportive relationships with students than do their counterparts at PWIs. However, when these institutions are not compared to others, previously undisclosed political realities and deeper insights into the conditions of support emerge. As Harper and colleagues (2004) suggested, additional studies in which HBCUs are not compared to PWIs are needed.

Moreover, assessing reactions to policies and shared governance of student organizations would be beneficial to HBCUs, since several participants in the study expressed dissatisfaction. Understanding how students perceive institutional actions and the enforcement of rules could be instructive to those who endeavor to foster engaging environments for student success. Also useful would be the assessment of the campus climates for LGBT students at Black colleges. Furthermore, while attrition is extremely complex and not easily attributable to a narrow set of factors, it is possible that some students withdraw prematurely because they perceive the institutional environments as politically oppressive and too restrictive. This should be investigated further by institutional researchers at HBCUs and in future studies on these campuses.

CONCLUSION

Too many Black men drop out of college. Some leave because of finances, insufficient academic preparation, and poor social choices (Bean, 2005), while others depart because their institutions have not invested enough effort into changing environments to foster a greater sense of belonging and congruence (Harper, 2008). Despite the consistent and irrefutable evidence confirming the effectiveness of HBCUs in providing a more affirming and outcomes-rich educational experience for Black students than do PWIs, neither institution type is blameless in contributing to the

retention crisis concerning Black male undergraduates. Urgently necessary are deliberate efforts to improve persistence and graduation rates, be it through fostering more engaging and democratic classrooms; making gay, bisexual, and questioning Black men feel more supported; making out-of-class leadership and engagement more attractive by increasing student ownership in clubs and organizations; or rethinking policies and practices that may be viewed as too conservative by many Black males. Findings from the present study suggest that Black male student frustration is a consequence of political conservatism at HBCUs, and years of research confirm that those who do not possess positive feelings toward their institutions are considerably more likely to leave (Bean, 2005).

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AUTHORS
SHAUN R. H
Pennsylvania.
MARYBETH
University of
Studies at Penn

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AUTHORS

SHAUN R. HARPER is Assistant Professor of Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania. He also holds a faculty appointment in the Center for Africana Studies at Penn.

MARYBETH GASMAN is Associate Professor of Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania. She also holds a faculty appointment in the Center for Africana Studies at Penn.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to sharperl@upenn.edu